

The Vanderbilt Agrarians: Time and Place in Southern Tradition

BY THOMAS LAWRENCE CONNELLY

IN 1930, a group of scholars who resided mainly at Vanderbilt University published a criticism of American society. Forming the core of this group, the Vanderbilt Agrarians, were four poets who had published a literary journal, *The Fugitive*, during the 1920's. These Nashville Fugitives who became Agrarians were Donald Davidson, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren. During the latter part of the decade, eight other scholars joined them — Stark Young and Andrew Nelson Lytle, novelists; John Gould Fletcher, a poet; John Donald Wade, professor of English; Frank L. Owsley and Herman Clarence Nixon, historians; Henry Blue Kline, journalist; and Lyle Lanier, psychologist. These were the Twelve Southerners.

The response to their exploratory volume, *I'll Take My Stand*, and their plea for maintaining the best in Southern tradition was largely a negative one. The Macon (Georgia) *Telegraph* branded the so-called "Agrarians" as "Neo-Confederates" and "a socially reactionary band." Gerald Johnson in *Harper's Magazine* belittled the attempts of the Twelve Southerners to find qualities in Southern tradition that were worthy of preservation.

Criticisms of the Agrarians

Recent evaluations of this group, including those of William B. Hesseltine in his *History of the South* and Henry Steele Commager in *The American Mind*, have dismissed the Agrarians as provincials who would have recreated a Golden Age in the style of Thomas Nelson Page. Dixon Wecter has described the Vanderbilt group as traditionalists who only wanted to wave the Bonnie Blue Flag. In a more perceptive account, *The Burden of Southern History*, C. Vann Woodward has suggested that historians in the past thirty years may have failed to take the Agrarians seriously because they were put off balance by the Agrarians' basic argument. The Vanderbilt group stressed that Progress, or the American Way of Life,

as demonstrated by heavy industry, better bathtubs, and the social pressures to conform, does not necessarily develop better individuals. By refusing to accept Progress as the established and only way, and by denouncing this Progress as a crude innovator and distributor of human development, the Agrarians probably committed their unprepared opponents to a defensive position.¹

The failure to recognize the Agrarians as an earnest group of legitimate social critics has led to a stock interpretation of the Vanderbilt movement. The Agrarians have been portrayed as twelve disgruntled scholars who disliked anything resembling Progress, and who preferred bullwhips and quasi-feudalistic society to modern civilization.

Why have critics not investigated more thoroughly this Southern school of criticism? Perhaps because historians did not recognize that the group's first co-operative effort, *I'll Take My Stand*, around which almost all criticism has raged, was only the experimental beginning of a thirty-year reappraisal of American society. The major topic of this volume — the agricultural problems of the South in the late 1920's — has been mistaken for its total purpose. This complete purpose actually was to initiate a general discussion of qualitative judgments of the Southern tradition. Historians have not considered the deeper philosophical and reform basis for the New Criticism.

Moreover, the Agrarians have not been fairly judged in the social and political context in which they began to write in the late 1920's. The underlying social criticisms of Southern and American society have been ignored and less sound expedients which the Agrarians offered for solving the South's economic problems during the Depression years have been substituted as the basis of interpretation. In fact, the argument could be made that there was actually no real Agrarian school. The initial suggestion in *I'll Take My Stand* that the South adhere to subsistence agriculture was only a means to a greater end — a thirty-year attempt to define a Southern tradition that was worth defending and to criticize American society in general. Over this thirty-year period, the Agrarians expounded at least four different approaches in their attempt to find this Southern identity and to criticize American society.²

¹ See C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge, 1960), 3-39.

² See Donald Davidson, *Southern Writers in the Modern World* (Athens, Georgia, 1957).

Intellectual Heritage of the Agrarians

Critics have also failed to recognize the diversities among individual members of the Agrarian school. Who were the Agrarians? They were not just the hard core of Mid-Southerners who wrote *I'll Take My Stand*, *Who Owns America?*, *Attack on Leviathan*, and *Southern Writers in the Modern World*. Indeed, they drew support from other reform elements such as a large group of Mid-Western and New England writers, from Humanists, English Distributists, and French Neo-Thomists. It may be argued that the Agrarians at Vanderbilt were part of a world movement of criticism which drew its support from Classicism rather than from Romanticism. Richard W. Weaver proposed in *Shenandoah* that the Agrarians sought to find a picture of the South in the over-all canvas of Western civilization. Right or wrong, the conclusion of the Agrarians that the South's institutions and values were a continuation of Western European culture and that the North was the innovator reversed the century-old roles of defendant and plaintiff in America. This reversal, as Wilbur Cash emphasized in *Mind of the South*, contributed toward puncturing the smugness of the doctrine of Progress and the American Way.⁸

The Vanderbilt movement in the late 1920's represented a merger of two streams of thought, the intellectual and reform heritage of the Agrarians and the immediate circumstances of the era which banded the Twelve Southerners together. What was the intellectual heritage of such men as these? Their heritage was a composite of several elements which fused within this group to incite a dissatisfaction with the course of American society and a conception of the Southern tradition as a guide for the needed social reformation. Intellectually, the Agrarians were influenced by the neo-medievalism of Hilaire Belloc, Gilbert Chesterton, and T. S. Eliot, and the classical tradition of St. Thomas Aquinas, Spinoza, Hobbes, and Kant. Therefore, the Agrarians were to argue from a classical tradition, with a distrust of reason and science, a fear of abstracts, and an absolute faith in the concrete. They were to argue that the modern consciousness had produced a loss of order and integrity which in turn had produced a loss of tradition and culture.

To the Agrarians, Tradition (i.e., the quality of judgment and conduct which provides stability) was lacking in the acquisitive

⁸ Robert Wooster Stallman, "The New Criticism and the Southern Critics," in Allen Tate (ed.) *A Southern Vanguard* (New York, 1947), 28-51; Wilbur J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York, 1941), 378-83.

society of the 1920's which stressed quantity over quality. Contingent to this belief was their idea that a systematic culture (i.e., belief in the supernatural, in religion and myth, in an objective system of truth) had been replaced by a faith in scientific abstracts and by the doctrine of man's ability to progress. The Agrarians believed in the limitations of man, in his gradation in society, in A. O. Lovejoy's Great Chain of Being — that to work against a stable and traditional society was a sin against God.

However, the Agrarians were also embedded in a reform tradition. They claimed as ancestors the French Physiocrats, Jefferson's beliefs in an agricultural society, and the Jacksonians (neatly interpreted by the Agrarians as agriculturalists who desired to reform an industrial society). The Agrarians derived their ideas from the reform trio of the Gilded Age—Henry Adams' *Democracy*, William James' *Bostonians*, and Herman Melville's *Clarel*. These works criticized or questioned industrial progress, denounced the acquisitive nature of capitalism as a disrupting force, and used Southern characters to portray the culture and stability of the society to which they aspired.⁴

The Agrarians also derived certain of their ideas from the Populist and Progressive traditions. Despite their belief in man's ability to improve himself, the Agrarians held one of the basic tenets of the Progressives of two decades earlier. That tenet was that legislation could cure all ills. Frank Owsley's "Pillars of Agrarianism," which appeared in the *Southern Review* in 1935, implied that some of the ills of the depression-ridden Southern farmer could be solved by legislation. Like the Progressives, the Agrarians deplored the transition of business from an individualistic level toward a level which demanded industrial discipline and engendered a managerial and bureaucratic outlook. They desired to retain some of the values of agrarian life, to save personal entrepreneurship, opportunity, and character type of the individual, and to maintain a homogeneous society.⁵

Like the Populists, the Agrarians verbally championed the tenant and sharecropper and urged sweeping government action to obtain publicly owned electric power, land distribution, and soil reform. In 1935 and again in 1938, the Agrarians called for a renewal of the Populist alliance of West and South against an industrial

⁴ Stallman, "The New Criticism and the Southern Critics," 29, 32, 34-35.

⁵ See Frank Owsley, "The Pillars of Agrarianism," in Richmond Croom Beatty and William Perry Fidler (eds.), *Contemporary Southern Prose* (Boston, 1940), 136-49.

Northeast. In the 1920's, when the Progressives split and their entire reform movement became embittered, the Agrarians held with the right wing against the urban progressives who had attacked the country mind, blaming it for everything from Prohibition to the Scopes Trial. As Eric Goldman contended in *Rendezvous With Destiny*, whatever its cause, the split of the Progressive movement in the 1920's helped advance the idea of modern, up-to-date conformity which the Agrarians were to oppose in the next decade.⁶

A third element comprising the intellectual background of the Twelve Southerners was their sense of place and time. During their youth, the Agrarians lived among the still numerous United Confederate Veterans. When they returned from the first World War, they found a South in a changing world, a world of rising commercialization of agriculture, of growing suburbs, of chambers of commerce. The Southerners were in this new world, and yet were consciously apart from and aware of its difference. Thus, the Southerners were endowed with a historical perspective, a two-way vision, a sense of the past in the present. As expressed by Allen Tate in "The New Provincialism," with the war of 1914-1918, the South re-entered the world; but the South gave a backward glance as it stepped across the border into the world. It was that backward glance, Tate contended, that produced the Southern renaissance of the 1920's and 1930's in its literature which embodied a consciousness of the past in the present. According to Vann Woodward in *The Burden of Southern History*, this historical perspective of the Agrarians was far superior to the flatness of the Midwestern perspective of Theodore Dreiser and Sherwood Anderson and provided an especially useful foundation for social criticism.⁷

This sense of time and place provided another stone in the intellectual foundation of the Agrarians, their conviction of the superiority of Southern society. To the Agrarians, the true American society was an agrarian one; this, they maintained, was the original

⁶ Reform measures of the Agrarians are stressed throughout Allen Tate and Herbert Agar (eds.), *Who Owns America?* (New York, 1935), and Donald Davidson, *The Attack on Leviathan* (Chapel Hill, 1938). See also Eric Goldman, *Rendezvous With Destiny: A History of Modern American Reform* (New York, 1956), 243-47.

⁷ Louis D. Rubin, Jr., "Southern Literature: The Historical Image," in Louis D. Rubin, Jr. and Robert D. Jacobs (eds.), *South: Modern Southern Literature in Its Cultural Setting* (New York, 1961), 29-47; Allen Tate, "The New Provincialism," in *On the Limits of Poetry* (New York, 1948), 292; Woodward, *Burden of Southern History*, 30-31.

American dream as envisioned by Thomas Jefferson and John Taylor. So extreme were the Agrarians in their demands for private property and in their fear of collective ownership that Frank Owsley in a 1935 essay entitled "Foundations of Democracy," advocated revamping the Constitution to give a wider distribution of property, and Alan Tate's "Notes on Liberty and Property" was interpreted as having Fascist overtones. Around them, the Agrarians saw a country which they thought was attempting to achieve faddishness, unrealism, and tawdry commercialism amid cries of "modernity" and "conformity." To the Twelve Southerners, pleas to reform the South by industrial progress were illusory; they feared that liberalism and industrialization were only a Trojan horse for collectivism. The larger industry became, the more central control would be required. Also, the Agrarians believed that a wholesale surrender was being made to the American Way by historians, social scientists, journalists, and church leaders during the 1920's. Among these wholesale defections, the Agrarians individually protested the South's courtship of modernity.⁸

In the 1920's, the Agrarians separately arrived at the same conclusion: that the traditional society of the Old South (which they envisioned as stability, leisure, independence, individuality, religion, and liberty of property) must be preserved as the true *American*, as well as Southern, heritage. Donald Davidson thus lamented the vanishing frontiersman in *The Tall Men*, and satirized middle class suburban life in "Fire on Belmont Street." Tate praised Southern virtues in his biography of Stonewall Jackson, and Robert Penn Warren lauded the South's traits in his biography of John Brown.

At this point, the Agrarians' literary sense of time and place momentarily overcame them. In their initial efforts, they oversimplified the issue, a fact they acknowledged with regret at their reunion some thirty years later. City and farm became symbols for that which was cheap and that which was stable in American society, respectively, for Northern invasion and Southern tradition, for aggrandizement and individual free enterprise. The landowner became the last outpost against Socialism. With the old Southern knack for recalling historical events in order to suit one's own

⁸ Frank Owsley, "The Foundations of Democracy," in *Who Owns America?*, 52-67; Allen Tate, "Notes on Liberty and Property," *ibid.*, 80-93; John Crowe Ransom, "Land," in *Harper's*, CLXV (1932), 216-24; Ransom, "The South Defends Its Heritage," in *Harper's*, CLIX (1929), 108-18; Ransom, "South is a Bulwark," in *Scribner's Monthly*, XCIX (1936), 299-303.

purpose, the Twelve Southerners became the descendants of Jefferson, John Taylor, Jackson, and even John C. Calhoun. Progress was viewed as a doctrine which smelled of Alexander Hamilton and capitalism and which had emerged victorious in American society only after the Civil War. Postwar Southerners such as Henry Grady and Walter Hines Page had sold out to the Trojan horse of Progress; the Agrarians determined that they would stand firm and reassert the values which they believed the Old South had once held. In so doing, they hoped to stem the advance of industrialization and its by-products as well as to halt the "wavering" from the Southern view by the younger Southern generation which threatened a pell mell rout.⁹

In *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, Henry Nash Smith describes an old frontier metaphor from the Mid-West which expressed an image of a vast, growing, agrarian society developing in the interior of the country, a veritable Garden of Eden. This myth of the Garden of the World was still another intellectual doctrine of the Agrarians. Borrowing this metaphor, the Agrarians viewed the South, the Tennessee Valley in particular, as a Southern Eden where simple, subsistence farming made the individual. According to Robert E. Heilman in "The South Falls In," an essay in Tate's *Southern Vanguard*, the Agrarians were to employ this metaphor at least through the mid-forties. The South, agreed the Agrarians, was listening to the serpentine voices of its critics who urged it to "Be like us, and rejoice." It would bite the apple of conformity. Becoming self-conscious of its naked individuality, it would put on the fig leaves of standardization. When the South left its Eden, shorn of its traditional values, the Agrarians feared that it would be nothing more than a self-conscious being in an uncertain world.¹⁰

No more forceful evidence of the Agrarian belief in the Myth of the Garden exists than in Donald Davidson's two-volume history of the Tennessee River. Davidson deplored the advent of the Tennessee Valley Authority, despite the Authority's encouragement of the same subsistence farming preached by the Agrarians themselves in the early thirties. Also, soil conservation, fertilizer experimenta-

⁹ Woodward, *Burden of Southern History*, 8-10; John Crowe Ransom, "Happy Farmers," in *American Review*, I (1933), 513-35, and "What Does the South Want?," in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, XII (1936), 180-94; Frank Owsley, "The Irrespressible Conflict," in *I'll Take My Stand* (New York, 1930), 61-91.

¹⁰ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York, 1957), 138-50; Robert B. Heilman, "The South Falls In," in Tate (ed.) *Southern Vanguard*, 122-35.

tion, and cheap electric power, all tenets of the Valley Authority, were advocated by John Crowe Ransom and Frank Owsley in 1933 and 1935. Why did the Agrarians oppose an organization which was designed to carry out their own suggested programs? It was that by doing these things *for* the farmer instead of permitting the farmer to accomplish the goals himself, the Valley Authority had stripped the Garden of its ability to teach individualism.¹¹

Social and Economic Issues of the 1920's

By 1930, these intellectual and reform backgrounds collided with the immediate issues of the late twenties. What were these immediate issues, as interpreted by the Agrarians? The first obvious issue was the farmer's plight. From the time of the Civil War, the great plantations were being dissolved and their ownership distributed. Simultaneously, the population of the South was increasing more rapidly than that of any other region. Thus, the holdings of one generation were continually being divided among the members of the next generation. The result of this division was a spectacular increase in the number of Southern farms. By 1930, almost eighty per cent of all Southern farmers had farms of less than 100 acres.

However, a proportional increase of farm *owners* did not follow from the increased number of farms. Cotton prices, population growth, and the native land hunger of the Southerners combined to create an aura of stiff competition for farm land. After the first World War, land hunger came into its own. Throughout the South, as cotton prices swept toward forty cents, everyone who could get credit began buying lands at high prices. Lands which sold for two dollars per acre in 1900 sold for 300 dollars in 1919. The Southerners expected to be able to resell the land for a profit or to raise cotton at a large profit.

Even the decreasing cotton prices of the early twenties did not discourage investment, for the South held to the romantic belief that wartime cotton prices would return. The increasing number of tenants, the sons of landowning farmers, and the well-to-do farmers set out to increase their holdings. By 1930, banks in

¹¹ Donald Davidson, *The Tennessee*, Volume II, *The New River, Civil War to TVA* (New York, 1948), in his chapter, "Green Lands and Great Waters," 289-305, hints at this idea; Ransom, "Happy Farmers," 164-66; Owsley, "Pillars of Agrarianism," 142-43, 146-48.

cotton counties often held mortgages on as much as half of the county's land. High land prices were disproportionate to the earning value of the land planted in cotton. The farmer, already burdened with mortgages and high interest charges, faced problems of higher living costs, the boll weevil, worn-out lands, and an increasingly competitive market in foreign cotton.

The result of these circumstances was suppression of the small farmers and nonlandowning classes in the South. It became increasingly difficult for the tenant and sharecropper to escape their status, and for the small farmer to retain his land. Tied to his mortgage and machinery, the farmer could not meet his payments after the decrease in cotton prices. His creditors, usually upper class bankers or businessmen, refused to allow cultivation of subsistence crops. These absentee landlords demanded that the farmer grow cash crops such as tobacco and cotton. Thus, the land continued to be depleted, more fertilizer was needed, the foreign market grew more threatening, and the cycle continued. By 1930, forty-five per cent of all Southern farmers were either tenants or sharecroppers.

Disaster struck in 1931, when individualistic Southern farmers ignored warnings and produced the third greatest cotton crop to date, seventeen million bales. Coupled with the surplus of previous years, this crop meant that the total world consumption had a surplus of sixteen million bales. Local banks, with vast stocks of mortgages that were worthless as collateral with Yankee bankers, were now calling on the farmer for payment. Credit was curtailed and thousands of Southern farms were lost because of insufficient funds to maintain staple agriculture. In 1932, eleven million acres less of cotton were planted than in 1929.¹²

In championing the farmer's plight, the Agrarians blamed Progress for his condition. What the Agrarians did not seem to realize was that the farmer had become a part of Progress itself; therefore, the Agrarians' reform proposals were repudiated by the very group they sought to help. The large landowner resented their inquiries into the condition of tenant and sharecropper; the lower class farmers, with other outlets for their pent-up emotions (such as fundamentalist religion and the Klan) viewed the Agrarian

¹² The best discussion of the South's farm problem in the 1920-1930 decade is found in Cash, *Mind of the South*, 273-85. See also Bell I. Wiley, "Salient Changes in Southern Agriculture Since the Civil War," in *Agricultural History*, XIII (1939), 65-76; and Emory Q. Hawk's *Economic History of the South*, (New York, 1933).

proposals for land reform as a menace to their own natural desire to join a higher economic bracket.¹³

A second immediate cause for the Agrarian movement in the late twenties was their dissatisfaction with Southern political leadership. The Agrarians rightly believed that few of the so-called champions of the poor operated independently of large financial and planter interests. Even when such "common man" demagogues as Cole Blease were elected, they did little to help the condition of the Southern farmer. State political machines, controlled by a business-large planter coalition, put forward their own demagogues, such as Cotton Ed Smith, who copied tactics of the older tradition of "common man" spokesmen. The Agrarians saw this vacuum of leadership, especially in Tennessee where machine politics and commercial interests were closely aligned. The dearth of political responsibility was likewise blamed on the infusion of Progress and the straying from old Southern tradition.¹⁴

Third, the rise of the Agrarian movement in the late twenties was partially a status revolution. Most of the original Agrarians, including Davidson, Warren, and Tate, were of old Tennessee and Kentucky families that had been forced to yield to the commercialization of agriculture. Indeed, several of the original Twelve Southerners were themselves farm owners. The Agrarians also shared many phobias common to the Southern white population of the era. These sources of irritation induced reactions including anti-Communism, anti-liberal, anti-alien, and anti-Darwin tendencies, Negrophobia, and horror of the World War.

While the ordinary white person in the South could vent his fears in sawdust religion or cross burning, the Agrarians felt that they could not intellectually do such. Therefore, they had no outlet for the complex of internal and external fears and hatreds which gripped the Southern and national mind during this decade. For the Agrarians, their attack on Progress was partially an outlet for these fears. Paradoxically, they recognized and revolted against the pattern of conformity and sameness which these fears were creating. It was their fear of conformity which prompted them to speak out so forcefully for individual property ownership,

¹³ Cash, *Mind of the South*, 273-85, 380-82.

¹⁴ See Daniel M. Robison, "From Tillman to Huey Long: Some Striking Leaders of the Rural South," in *Journal of Southern History*, III (1937), 288-310; John Crowe Ransom, "Reconstructed but Unregenerate," in *I'll Take My Stand*, 1-27; Rubin, "Southern Literature: the Historical Image," 40; Davidson, *The Attack on Leviathan*.

and even at the expense of government control. This fear also made them lash out at H. L. Mencken's jibes at the South; it made them contest bitterly the social planning of regionalists at the University of North Carolina. The 1939-1940 argument between the Vanderbilt group and the Chapel Hill regionalists was concentrated on the key question of what constitutes individuality. To the Twelve Southerners, the regional planning of Howard Odum and Rupert Vance was conformity to a national pattern. The Agrarians, with some soundness, argued that regionalism without retention of peculiar sectional traits became provincialism at any level, national or world-wide.

The best example of this dualism of restraint and individuality was the effect of the 1926 Scopes Trial upon the Southerners. They were fearful of the scientific arguments as a threat to tradition, and simultaneously were repulsed by the narrowmindedness of those who were contesting for religious orthodoxy. John Crowe Ransom was prompted to write *God Without Thunder*, advocating a Christian individualism that was free from the conformity of either extreme.¹⁵

Contributions of the Agrarians to Southern Regional Identity

It was in such an intellectual, political, economic, and social pattern that the Agrarian program was launched. Although their philosophy has been much maligned, two factors must not be overlooked. First, most criticism of the Vanderbilt school has failed to consider that the Agrarians did not have a static philosophy, but rather one of constantly changing ideas. Second, critics have failed to differentiate between those principles which might hold true today, and those economic and political programs which historians today criticize retrospectively for being outmoded.

After their initial argument had been unfavorably received, the Agrarians realized that they must devise a suitable program to meet the needs of the depression. From 1930 to 1935, they made sweeping proposals for government reform. They advocated government rehabilitation of the farmer; they promoted a policy of land division; they even advocated legislation that would prohibit the farmer from buying labor-saving machinery lest he increase his indebtedness and be corrupted by his increased leisure time. They desired taxes on all new farm loans in order to keep out

¹⁵ Davidson, *Southern Writers in the Modern World*, 39-41; *I'll Take My Stand*, xix-xxx.

commercial agriculture; they preached public aid to the farmer. Even Frank Owsley, the apostle of regionalism, asked that the government give every tenant farmer eighty acres, a hewn log house, livestock, and a year's living expenses.¹⁶

Although the Southerners were striking around the farm problem, they were missing the mark. They were correct in two respects: (1) the world market for Southern cotton was a thing of the past at least for a time, and (2) commercial farming was not proving profitable. Also, it was desirable that the yeoman farmer be a landowner. However, the Southerners who preached concreteness never went beyond these general proposals. How was the yeoman to return to the land; if he did so, how was he to retain his mortgaged land? As Cash indicated in *The Mind of the South*, the Depression meant a change in landlords and the Southern farmer was farther than ever from the landlord who might be an Eastern banker. Promoting measures to make the farmer self-sufficient and to restore his individualism may have had virtue, but not to hungry tenants. They ignored the Agrarian plea for subsistence agriculture and seized the benefits of the New Deal.¹⁷

Obviously there was not always consistency between the principles of the Agrarians and the programs which they advocated. After 1935, they distrusted the social legislation of Roosevelt's administration even more than they had the industrialization of the twenties. However, many programs which the Agrarians attacked in the late thirties in *Attack on Leviathan* and *Who Owns America?* were actually the programs of government intervention which they themselves had advocated a few years earlier. They once had advocated cheap electric power, government subsidies, accelerated programs of rural education, and government sponsorship of soil erosion control. When these very principles were activated by Roosevelt, however, the Agrarians retreated back into their principles.

Also, the Agrarians could not agree even among themselves. Their own individualities became a trap in their advocating individuality. In *I'll Take My Stand*, Stark Young accepted industrialization of the South and hoped the South could profit from it; Ransom and Davidson deplored this industrialization. Donald Davidson urged the individual farmer to find his own methods of

¹⁶ The changes in the Agrarian proposals are discernible in *I'll Take My Stand*, *Who Owns America?* and *The Attack on Leviathan*.

¹⁷ Cash, *Mind of the South*, 381-82.

survival; Frank Owsley cried for government intervention.

Their principles, too, were paradoxical. The Southerners deplored the loss of individualism in the South, and yet they were paternalistic in their view of the sharecropper and tenant. Although they attacked social planning, they advocated enforcement of subsistence agriculture. They preached liberty of property ownership, but never forgot their principle of gradation, i.e., that some classes were not ready to accept the responsibility of property ownership. While they called for vibrant Southern political leadership, they preached a regional government that was reminiscent of John C. Calhoun. Perhaps it is these inconsistencies which provide the key to understanding the Twelve Southerners as well as the entire Southern identity in an age of rapid change.

What is the importance of the Twelve Southerners? Perhaps it lies in the fact that they were a watershed of Southern characteristics in an age when, as Vann Woodward suggested, Southernism was threatened with loss of identity. Both unintentionally and purposefully, the Agrarians have illustrated and do illustrate those marks of Southern identity which Progress or Leviathan was unable to erase. In their inconsistencies, their faults, their principles, and their strictly literary approach of the 1940's and 1950's, they have preserved a Southern identity.¹⁸

What are the marks of this Southern identity? First, the Agrarians were paradoxical and recognized that the South dwelt in paradoxes. As they had noted, the South kept a nostalgic eye on its birthright but still hankered after the fleshpots. Ancestor worship was coupled with a love of the up-to-date. Material and emotional phenomena summarized under the easy term "backwardness" were coupled with an expanding devotion to "progress," as illustrated in the Congress of Southern Governors. Although there is more illiteracy in the South than in any other part of the country, at the same time, one of the most complex and subtle of modern literary movements exists there. Marked inhospitality to restraints is coupled with a Southern passion for the rigors of military training. Long experience with poverty has not quelled an indifference to the materials of existence, for one either sees bright new automobiles in the South or else not-so-old automobiles worn hard and ready to die young.

Southern pride, too, is a nucleus of contradictions. At its finest, this pride is an awareness of an achieved way of life. At its worst,

¹⁸ Woodward, *Burden of Southern History*, 27-39, 25, 38-39.

it is a Faustian political and economic corruption. Beneath the self assurance of the Southerners is diffidence and uncertainty. In the South, there is a pride in the old, individualistic self-subsistence, but also a worship of bigness and a sharp eye for the tobacco allotment paycheck. This is not to say that only Southern identity enjoys paradox. The difference is that the essential paradoxes of the South are closer to the surface and more apparent than those of other sections where a more historical continuity has made possible a leveling-off and shrewd suppression of regional contradictions.¹⁹

Second, the Agrarians reminded us that the South had suffered an un-American experience of continued poverty. The Southerners emphasized the discrepancies in living standards, per capita wealth and income, and criticized the American Standard of Living as later described by Vann Woodward. The Agrarians assured their fellow Southerners that they did not participate in the American legend of success and invincibility. In fact, their argument for holding fast to Southern traits in the 1930's was essentially that the South had suffered constant frustration and defeat from the time of the Civil War, and that that decade might be the region's last stand.

Moreover, the Southern identity does not share the doctrine of human perfectibility, i.e., that every evil has a cure, every problem a solution. The Agrarians rejected utopian schemes and the gospel of Progress, and reaffirmed a belief in man's inability to remold himself, his stability, and his place in nature.

Like their fellow Southerners, the Agrarians were never able to eradicate the consequences of the region's participation in a feudal fantasy in which everyone was not born free. The Agrarians never overcame the old dualism of individualism and paternalism, of the plantation system and liberty of property.

Again, like the entire South, the Agrarians had a definite distrust of the abstract. As Robert Penn Warren described it, the South has

the fear of abstraction . . . the instinctive fear, on the part of black or white, that the massiveness of experience, the concreteness of life, will be violated . . .

Both Tate and Ransom emphasized the Agrarian stand for the absolute as opposed to scientific rationalism.²⁰

¹⁹ Heilman, "The South Falls In," 127-29.

²⁰ Woodward, *Burden of Southern History*, 17-23.

Finally, the Southern identity has been preserved by the peculiar historical consciousness of Southern writers, in the very years when the outward traits of regional difference were collapsing. This distinctive trait is perhaps the most important contribution of the Agrarians, for they inaugurated it. By turning to the somber realities of defeat, hardship, and evil, instead of to romantic dreams of the past, the Vanderbilt writers brought to realization the powerful potential in literature of the South's heritage and experience of defeat.²¹

None of the Southern traits, except for the last one mentioned, were developed by the Vanderbilt school. The Twelve Southerners only provided a watershed for the traits, by restating or by exemplifying them, and then, as Donald Davidson related in the Lamar Lectures, by concentrating on literature in the 1940's and 1950's as the means of expressing the South's heritage.

The Southerners did more than help to preserve a regional identity. They provided a new criticism of American society. In the thirties, they warned against an excessive dependence upon national myths and an American Way which might become a religion and the deviation from it a heresy. The Agrarians chose to deny that the common denominator was Progress. They warned against the disintegrating effects of a nationalism that was the result of the abandonment of regional distinctions. Reversing the roles by calling the progress of modern American society into question, they warned of society's decision to invest the bulk of its economic resources in applied sciences, and warned against the modern super state as the manager of the total economic system.

It is true that the Twelve Southerners were concerned with the aristocratic notion of the South, and that they took little account of the *total* underdog—Negro, sharecropper, industrial laborer, and tenant. Although the virtues which they assigned to the Old South—honor, courage, amiability, courtesy—were ones it probably possessed, they failed to observe the faults of the old system. To attribute the South's diseases only to commercialism and industrialization is to ignore many traits inherent in the old system, such as paternalism and one-crop agriculture, which equally contributed to the South's ills.²²

The Agrarians did direct attention to the evils of *laissez-faire*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

²² Cash, *Mind of the South*, 380-83; Rubin, "Southern Literature: the Historical Image," 36-39.

industrialism, did question the definition of progress, and did warn of the pressures of conformity in a supernational state. It is for this social criticism, and for their restatement of Southern traits in time and place, that the Twelve Southerners should not be dismissed as antiquarians crying in the wilderness.